THE STORY OF SAINT BRIGID

"IONA"

The Story of Saint Brigid

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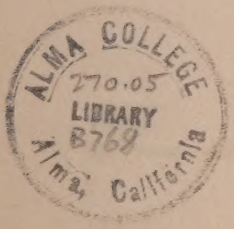
St. Blath—" . . . My story must not be an excuse for idleness . . ."

The Story of Saint Brigid

(In the form of a Dialogue between St. Blath (6th century) and a Novice in one of Saint Brigid's Convents)

By "IONA"

Author of
The Story of Saint Columba"
etc.



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THIS STORY OF IRELAND'S FIRST ABBESS
IS DEDICATED, WITH FILIAL RESPECT, TO
MADAME LUCIE P. SCHMITT, O.S.B.
ABBESS OF ST. MICHEL DE KERGONAN,
PLOUHARNEL, MORBIHAN, FRANCE

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE.

THE spontaneous joy that welcomed the news in the early days of the year 1929, that the Very Rev. J. McCarroll of Killester had obtained from Portugal a relic of St. Brigid's holy body, proved once more that Ireland has an unforgetting heart, and that our " dear Saint of Leinster " has still the power which distinguished her over fourteen centuries ago when she lived among us—the power of evoking affection and gladdening by her simple presence every place she passed by. This is no small honour both for St. Brigid and ourselves, for there is a fashion even in saints, and the *culte* of many—even very great saints has had to suffer from the passage of time and the instability of human affections. But St. Brigid! It would be almost as impossible to forget her as to forget Ireland. If we dare say it, she is even more completely identified with our country than St. Patrick or St. Colmcille. Patrick was not born in Ireland, and had lived more than half his lifetime when he came to preach the Gospel. Colmcille left us in the prime of life and died in exile, but Brigid lived and loved and worked her whole life through in Ireland, and it is in her own land she reigns, " Sovereign lady, safely enthroned, triumphant, upon the side of the Liffey."[1]

[1] From *Hail Brigit,* an old Irish poem on the Hill of Alenn—translated by Kuno Meyer.

The fact that Brigid had a Leinster chieftain for her father, and that she founded the City and the great School of Kildare, makes the eastern province claim her most particularly as its own, but Brigid is a national saint, and every part of the country was visited by her when she went on her missionary journeys. There is scarcely a mountain or a glen that does not hold some memory of her, or that cannot show some mark of her blessed passage.[2] Here, it is a well that has healing waters, because she drank from it; there, a flag-stone on which she lay; yonder, the remains of a ruined Cill-Bride—everywhere the fruits of her sowing and the sense of the protection of her holy *brat*.

It was not only after the centuries had proved the greatness of her work that Brigid's worth was recognised in Ireland. Both her greatness and her holiness were felt by her countrymen during her lifetime—in her childhood even. "Thou should'st be serving not me but the Lord," said the Druid when he saw the butter miraculously increased by her prayer, and Dunlaing Mac Enda, when her father would have put her to service in his house: "It is not meet for us to deal with this maiden." Later on she became one of the most famous and loved personages in the country, famous because of her great talents, and loved because of her own loving nature and her tender compassion for all God's creatures. It is no wonder that after her death holy men set themselves the task of recording her virtues and miracles,[3] and that poet-saints wrote

[2] St. Cuimin of Connor calls her "Brigid of the Blessings."
[3] St. Ultan, her kinsman, collected the material for the metrical life of the saint, which was written by St. Bragan.

her life in verse, and made hymns and poems in her praise. That these old hagiologists[4] loved their work is evident from their diligent enumeration of all the wonders and miracles that marked her life, and their tenderness of expression when eulogizing her virtues and wonderful qualities. We notice, too, what clever psychologists they were, and how they can give us an intimate knowledge of Brigid's character in a word or a phrase: "Never hath there been anyone more *harmonious* than Brigid," says one of them, and what more telling word than *that*, has ever been written by any one on a saint?

From the point of view of the historian or story-teller, Brigid's ancient biographers are not, however, so satisfactory. The *Lives*, particularly the metrical ones, are often meagre in historical facts, and it is only by comparing them and consulting trustworthy authorities that we can arrive at knowing the *story* of the saint. Even then there are points which will remain obscure, but the traditional Brigid—the Brigid of our hearts—can easily be traced, and it is this Brigid whom we wish to tell of in this little book.

[4] The Ancient *Lives of St. Brigid,* printed by Colgan, range from the seventh to the twelfth century. *The Acts of the Saints* (Bollandus, Vol. IV.) give five of these lives, and the celebrated *Life* by Cogitosus has also a place in *Migne's Patrology* (Vol. LXXII.) The same miracles and many of the incidents in St. Brigid's life are repeated in those works —the one great divergence being on the circumstances of her birth. We have chosen to follow the authority of the *Third, Fourth, and Fifth Lives* which give Brocessa, the slave maiden, as the mother of Brigid. It is the most generally received opinion in Ireland, and accounts for many events in her childhood. All are agreed that Dubtach, her father, was of royal blood.

We have put her story on the lips of St. Blath,[5] because she knew and loved her well, and we are sure she would have liked to talk of her; we have made the novice Candida ask questions for the information of others as well as herself, as no one minds *listening* while another is being taught, though many do not like asking questions, particularly when it is about something that they should know!

One word more. St. Blath and Candida and those they talk of had simple souls and fresh young hearts; simplicity and freshness of heart marked all the early Irish saints—bishops and great abbots, as well as Brigid's first maiden companions. For *nous autres* who live in a world fifteen centuries older than that of the early Irish Christians, such simplicity is difficult, but their strong faith comes easy to us, and there are not many cynics among us. May we not hope then that those who come to listen to the STORY OF ST. BRIGID will not feel themselves strangers in the old-time company of St. Blath and the novice Candida.

[5] St. Blath was a religious in one of St. Brigid's convents. In her childhood she had been a shepherdess on the Curragh of Kildare. (Feast, 29th January.)

She went to and fro singing and carrying the butter

The Story of St. Brigid

CONFERENCE I.

The Childhood of St. Brigid.

The Lord ruleth me: and I shall want nothing.—Ps. xxii, 1.

The Novice Candida:[1] A blessing on your work, good Sister, but cease for a moment I beg while I tell you my happy news. Just now, while walking with the Sisters in the orchard, we fell to talking of our holy Mother foundress Brigid, and I asked if any living now among us had seen her and known her. What was my surprise when they told me that you, dear kind old Sister Blath, were often with her and knew her well!

St. Blath: Yes, God be thanked for it, I knew her and loved her, and we were to each other as mother and child. But your "happy news," what is it?

Candida: It is that I have leave to talk with you for a whole hour once a week while you tell me the story of holy Brigid and your memories of her!

St. Blath: That indeed is happy news and for us both, as you will have many beautiful things to hear and I shall love to tell them.

1 Latinised forms of names—such as *Candida, Benignus, Innocentia*—were sometimes used in early Christian Ireland, and often denoted a characteristic of the person who bore the name.

Candida: Will you begin then, Sister, now, this very morning?

St. Blath: If you wish, but talking is no excuse for idleness, so while I heat the hearth stones, you can roll out and cut the oaten cake.

Candida: Work, work, work in the kitchen and in the fields! Do you never wish for a rest, Sister?

St. Blath: No, our blessed Mother never spared herself in bodily labour, why then, should I?

Candida: Tell me, were you very young when you first met her?

St. Blath: Yes, quite a child. It was one day in Spring time while I was shepherding my father's flocks. The wild flowers were just coming into blossom and I remember I had gathered a big posy and was looking at them and thinking how great God's beauty must be when a thought of his could bring them into being. Brigid passed by just at that moment, and she stopped and asked me my name. I told her my companions called me Blath,[2] because of my love for flowers. She smiled, and placing her hand on my head she blessed me and bade me try to keep my heart as fresh and white as those blossoms.

Candida: I think you have obeyed her well, dear old Sister Blath.

St. Blath: I don't know, I only know that the Spring flowers seem just as fair to me now as when I was a child, and I see new beauty in the earth and in souls

[2] *The Acts of the Saints* refer to her as "Blatha or Flora."

every day. But here I am talking of myself instead of our good Mother.

Candida: You are talking of her too. Did you meet her often after that day she blessed you?

St. Blath: Yes, for I felt irresistibly drawn to her, and I would often bring my sheep to graze near her convent in the hope of seeing her. I loved, too, to listen to the convent bell that called the sisterhood to prayer, and I would pray myself at the same time. Brigid noticed this, and she often came and spoke to me of heavenly things. She taught me some psalms too, and explained their meaning to me. I remember how pleased I was to know that the great king David thought of God as a Shepherd who sets his flocks in places of pasture and brings them to the waters of refreshment.[3]

Candida: Did you soon join holy Brigid's community?

St. Blath: It was like this. I earnestly besought our holy Abbess to receive me. She consented, but fearing that my affection for her was too human, and to try my obedience, she sent me to another of her convents.[4]

Candida: Ah! that was indeed a trial. I wonder if I would ever have had the courage to accept it!

St. Blath: What use, my little one, in wondering if you could do something you are not asked to do! I saw our Mother sometimes, and I was happy to do

[3] Ps. xxii, 2.

[4] We are told in the old Irish *Lives of the Saints,* that St. Brigid assigned the duties of cook to St. Blath.

her will. But that is quite enough about my young days. I must tell you now about Brigid's childhood.

Candida: She belonged to your own Leinster, did she not?

St. Blath: Yes, for her father was a Leinster Chieftain. Dubtach was his name, and he was of royal blood. Her mother, Brocessa, however, did not share a royal lineage, neither did she enjoy the privileges of a chieftain's wife, and Brigid was born away from her father's house.[5] All this brought pain and suffering and humiliation early into her life.

Candida: Holy Brigid to have known pain and suffering as a child! The thought makes me sad.

St. Blath: It makes me rather rejoice, for God used these same sufferings to show most wonderfully His predilection for the child, and the great grace that she found in His eyes. He was even pleased to honour her unconscious babyhood with signs and marvels, for I have heard that those who watched by her cradle heard the singing of angel voices, and a pillar of fire was seen marking the place where she lay the night of her birth.[6]

Candida: Then she was always good and sweet?

St. Blath: Yes, the seeds of grace sown by her Christian baptism seem to have fructified with marvellous rapidity, and soon her beauty of soul was visible

[5] At Faughart, 451—58.

[6] All the stories and miracles related in this book are taken from the Ancient *Lives of St. Brigid,* as given by the Bollandists in *The Acts of the Saints.*

to all—almost as visible as her great bodily beauty. Everyone, Christian and pagan who came in contact with her felt that she was something apart from them and above them, and that they should not deal with her as with others.

Candida: How proud her father must have been of his little daughter!

St. Blath: In her early childhood Brigid was not with her father, but away with her mother in a Druid's house, where they were both working.

Candida: No matter what *you* think, Sister Blath; *I* think it was very sad and hard that the lovely little Christian girl should be working for pagans. What you say makes me dislike and despise her royal father.

St. Blath: Not so fast with your judgments! Dubtach was not really bad, but there were those in his household who were jealous of Brigid, and he dared not have her with him. Her Druid master and his wife were not bad either. They had kind hearts, and they did not resist the grace which Brigid's presence in their house brought them—as you will see by a story I will tell you.

Candida: First tell me please what her work was. I like to have pictures in my mind of our holy Mother at work.

St. Blath: Her work was shepherding, and the caring for the milk of twelve cows.

Candida: Wait a minute, Sister, and I will tell you how I see Brigid at work. I see her in the woods

communing with God and nature, surrounded by her flock of snow-white sheep—whiter than any others, I am sure, and never wanting to stray far away from her. I see the wild birds feeding from her hand, and I seem to hear them singing their sweetest songs in thanks for her bounty. I see her in her dairy—a white, spotless dairy—churning and shaping the butter, clad in a white woollen tunic, singing and happy, and bringing sunshine wherever she went. Tell me, Sister Blath, you who knew her is my picture true?

St. Blath: Yes, but it is not complete, since it did not show Brigid with her hand stretched out to the needy and poor, and her industry in succouring them.

Candida: But since she was only a child at this time and working for others, how could she gratify her wish by helping the poor?

St. Blath: Love is ingenious, and remember she had the "King of Miracles" for her Friend. The poor placed their hope in her, God did not allow their hope to be confounded but deigned to work great miracles through Brigid for their satisfying.

Candida: And your story how her presence brought grace to the Druid's household? Will you tell it to me now?

St. Blath: With all my heart. It is a story that will make you know and love Brigid, and it foreshadows her whole life, because it tells of her compassion for the poor, and shows the strength of her prayer. Our holy Mother, as I told you, worked as a child in the Druid's dairy, and was in the habit of putting aside

a large portion of butter for the poor and the stranger. Her charity soon became known, and the poor came in crowds begging the alms of the holy little dairy-maid's butter. Now, one day that she had given all that she had in the dairy, the Druid and his wife came and asked a large hamper of butter for themselves. They had heard of her lavish giving, and wished to take her by surprise and punish her. But Brigid was neither frightened nor embarrassed—her faith was too strong for that. She simply turned and cheerfully went into her dairy singing some verses which came spontaneously to her lips, begging "Mary's Son, her Prince, and her Friend from whom all abundance comes, to bless her kitchen with His right hand, to bless," said she, " my kitchen that *hath* butter."

Candida: O, why did she not rather say my *empty* kitchen, since all the butter was gone?

St. Blath: Because she believed firmly that her wish would be granted simultaneously with her prayer.[7] And she was not deceived, for as she sang her little song she went to and from the dairy carrying each time the butter of half a churning till a large hamper was filled.

Candida: The Druid and his wife surely must have recognised something supernatural in all that.

St. Blath: Yes, and the light of faith suddenly coming to the Druid he cried out in admiration: " It is in the service of the Lord you should be, not in

[7] *Inexstinguibili flamma fidei accensa,* says Cogitosus of her when relating this incident in her life.

mine!" He told Brigid, moreover, to keep the butter miraculously provided, and he offered her the twelve cows that she cared on his farm. The child begged, instead, her mother's freedom, and this so touched the Druid's heart that he gave her both the freedom of her mother and the present of the cows. She took the cows, but gave them at once to her beloved poor, thanking God for His goodness to her, but above all thanking Him for His grace given to her pagan master and mistress, for both begged to be baptized and both became fervent Christians.

Candida: That, indeed, is a beautiful story, and I see now how our holy Mother's life of servitude as a child brought her honour instead of shame. But tell me, what happened when she became free?

St. Blath: She went to live in her father's house, where she remained some time. Her beauty and charm increased with the years as did the graces which adorned her soul, and when she had reached a marriageable age the fame of her gifts had spread throughout the land. Numbers, and among them the highest and most powerful in Eire sought her hand, but she refused even to listen to their pleading for God's choice had fallen on her, and she had determined to belong to Him alone.

Candida: What did her father say to that? Nothing good, I expect.

St. Blath: He was highly angered, and for two selfish reasons. He wished for an alliance with some powerful prince or chieftain through his daughter's

marriage, and also to disembarrass himself of her presence in his house for her ways were opposed to his. Brigid was humble and charitable and thought only of giving to the poor. Everything that she could find in her father's house or on his lands she would give them; food, raiment, jewels, cattle or sheep, till at last Dubtach saw himself in danger of losing all his possessions!

Candida: But if Brigid's marriage would have disembarrassed him of her presence, why not also her taking of the veil?

St. Blath: Because in those days of early Christianity in our country it was customary for consecrated virgins to live in their own home, as they did in the early ages of the Church in Rome—you forget that it was holy Brigid herself who founded the first convent in Eire.

Candida: Do tell me how that came to pass.

St. Blath: First, I must tell you what followed on Brigid's refusal to marry. Dubtach listened to evil counsellors—those who were jealous of Brigid's beauty and virtue, as well as angry at her charity—and tired out by this pleading he consented to banish her from his house.

Candida: Banish his daughter! He is now less a favourite of mine than ever!

St. Blath: He was indeed weak and worldly, but listen to what followed and you will see that God sometimes permits evil in order to draw good from it.

If Dubtach had not formed this project of banishing Brigid from his house, we should have had one less beautiful story to tell of her and her consecration to God might have been considerably delayed. But look, child, the cakes are burning for want of turning, and the sand in the hour glass has nearly run down! *That* means that I must put off telling you till next time the wonderful story of how Brigid's charity to a poor beggarman gained her, her heart's desire. Run off, now to your duties, and a blessing on you till our next meeting.

Candida: A blessing on yourself, dear Sister, and may the Son of Mary bless your store and your kitchen, just as He blessed Brigid's kitchen in the Druid's house long ago.

When she touched the altar the dry wood shot forth leaves

CONFERENCE II.

How Brigid Founded Ireland's First Convent.

I know my God that thou . . . . lovest simplicity, wherefore I also in the simplicity of my heart have joyfully offered all these things.—1 Par. xxix, 17.

Candida: God save you, Sister Blath!

St. Blath: God save you kindly, child! I was expecting you for the length of the shadows across from the oak wood told me it was the hour for our meeting.

Candida: And the call of the cuckoo told *me* that you would be thinking of turning the earth for your herb sowing, and that I would find you here. I was hoping too that we might have our talk about holy Brigid in the open. May I stay with you here, Sister?

St. Blath: Yes, and welcome. Nature to-day will help me in the telling of our dear Mother's story, her own heart was so like to the Spring time, fresh and pure and bespeaking youth.

Candida: And yet, I think, she was old when she died?

St. Blath: Yes, but neither years nor fatigue could touch the freshness of her heart.

Candida: Tell me how was that? I would much like, myself, never to grow old. But perhaps it was her own secret, this manner of keeping young?

St. Blath: No, for everyone saw its cause. It was her great love for God and all his creatures, great and small, that kept her nature so sweet and young. She was even seeing new beauties in the world and in souls, and thus new motives to love and praise God. Everything spoke to her of Him. The beauties of the earth and sky were a reflection of *His* beauty; the power of the elements a likeness of His greatness; the care of a mother-bird for her young an image of His providence. But above all it was the poor, the sick, the afflicted who spoke to her of God, because to her they were His children, and the suffering members of Christ's mystical body.

Candida: How beautiful it was, holy Brigid's manner of keeping a young heart!

St. Blath: Yes, and if you try to imitate her by giving love and sympathy to all around you, I can promise you that you, too, will never grow old.

Candida: Thank you, Sister, for your good words, but do you know that our talk to-day is more serious than I had expected, and I am longing to know the story of how Brigid's charity to a poor man brought her the veil.

St. Blath: I will tell you, but you must understand that in telling you my memories of our holy Mother I may sometimes pause to tell you what she was, as well as what she did.

Candida: O tell me everything I beg, good Sister, and in the way it seems best to you, only I confess to a great love of hearing stories.

St. Blath: You shall have plenty of stories later on, when I come to tell you of all her wonder-working. And now for our beggar man! You remember how Dubtach yielded to the solicitations of those around him, and consented to banish Brigid from his house?

Candida: Yes, and pray, where did he send her?

St. Blath: He conceived the idea of sending her to join the maids who served in the palace of his friend Dunlaing Mac Enda, King of Leinster. One day then, he bade her mount with him in his chariot, and he set out for Dunlaing's Dun. On the way he told her the meaning of their journey. The thought of serving in no way troubled Brigid. Her humility made her think that it was fitting that she should work and her faith in God assured her of His care. When they arrived at the palace Dubtach went in to talk to the king. He told our holy Mother to remain in the chariot till his return, and knowing her great charity to the poor, and fearing some one in need might come that way, he took care to leave nothing in the chariot but his sword. After some time a poor man, a leper, came down the road and begged an alms from Brigid, and as she had nothing else to bestow on him she gave him her father's sword!

Candida: But had she no fear of her father's anger?

St. Blath: With her, love cast out every fear, and when Dubtach returned and upbraided her with great anger for what she had done, she simply said: "I gave it to Christ." Then Dunlaing, who was standing by, declared he could not take such a one into his

service. " She will much more give away my goods than yours," said he to her father, and Brigid said: " The Son of Mary knows that had I the power of ye with all the riches of Leinster I would give them to the God of the Elements."

Candida: That was surely royally spoken!

St. Blath: Yes, and her words seem to have brought light to Dunlaing, for, like the Druid, he recognised the spirit of the Lord in Brigid, and he told Dubtach that it was not meet for them to deal with her: " Her merit is higher before the Lord than ours," said he, and he presented Dubtach with his own royal sword to replace the one given by Brigid to the poor leper man.

Candida: And her father?

St. Blath: Her father's heart seems to have been softened by Dunlaing's words, for he returned home peaceably with Brigid, and left her free to serve the Lord as she would. A quiet happy time followed, and then she left her father's house inspired by the Holy Spirit to seek her veiling from the hands of the good Bishop Macaille in a neighbouring district.[1]

Candida: Did she go away alone?

St. Blath: No, for seven other young girls, friends of Brigid who also earnestly desired to consecrate themselves to God, begged leave to accompany her.

Candida: I can imagine the holy bishop's joy in receiving them.

[1] Generally supposed to be Cruachan Bri Eile, now called Croghan Hill (near Tyrrell's Pass.)

St. Blath: Certainly he must have rejoiced, but he did not grant their request at once. The maidens were young and beautiful, and he thought it might be but a youthful caprice that led them to leave their homes. Very soon, however, he recognised the spirit of God in the little band, and to their great joy he gave them the veil and the white habit of our nuns of Eire.

Candida: God be praised for His goodness! I think there must have been joy in heaven that day.

St. Blath: We cannot doubt it, and God worked two beautiful miracles for His glory and Brigid's honour before the crowd who had gathered to witness the ceremony. When the eight maidens entered the church a great column of fire was seen to rest on Brigid's head, and when she laid her hand on the altar, the sap circulated in the dry wood, and it became fresh and green and shot forth leaves as if it were growing in the forest.

Candida: O Sister, it makes me so pleased to know that Brigid's holiness was manifested like that. How surprised everyone must have been!

St. Blath: Yes, for her humility and meekness had always made her seek the lowest place among her companions, now it was evident that God regarded her as the most excellent.

Candida: Did they separate after their veiling?

St. Blath: No, Brigid's seven young friends recognising how she could lead them on their way to holiness and wishing to be separated from the world, begged her to remain with them, and proposed that they

should make their dwelling together in that place. Bishop Macaille was also desirous that the maidens should remain together, so Brigid stayed with them, and thus was formed the first religious community in our country.

Candida: It must have been a little paradise!

St. Blath: Yes, but a very busy little paradise. It was first of all a time of strict religious training. The eight little novices were young, and they had to be exercised in the science of prayer and the virtues particular to their state of consecrated virgins to Christ. It was necessary, too, that they should be well versed in the doctrines of Christianity. Remember at this time,[2] only about thirty-five years had passed since Patrick had brought us the blessed light of faith, and though it had spread so quickly and burned so ardently it was *new* in our land, and needed most wise tending, lest any pagan influence should obscure it.

Candida: And who was it who instructed them and formed them? Was it the great Patrick?

St. Blath: I do not think that Patrick had anything to do personally with the religious training of the little community. It was the good Bishop Macaille who undertook this important charge. You know they were in his diocese, and he was most suited to be their spiritual father. He was a most holy man, kind and wise too, and filled with zeal for God's glory and the perfecting in holiness of the little band. Brigid it

[2] About the year 467.

was who was their mother, and she directed the life and the occupations of all in the convent.

Candida: A young mother surely.

St. Blath: Yes, not more than seventeen years of age, I think, but the trials of her own childhood, and her great charity which had brought her into contact with the sufferings of others had matured her nature, and everyone readily gave her their confidence.

Candida: You spoke just now about Brigid directing the occupations of the Sisters. Can you tell me what these occupations were?

St. Blath: They were very like your own, my little Sister. When the novices were not praying or learning from Bishop Macaille and our holy Mother, they were employed at the simplest kind of work, and for the most part inside the house. This little convent of Cruachan was really a novitiate and was thus different from the foundations made afterwards, very different, for example, from Cill Dara which Brigid's great talents as well as her holiness made famous among the schools and cities of our country.

Candida: And did the seven novices with Brigid have Cruachan all to themselves?

St. Blath: Not for very long, for soon after their veiling other maidens both of high and lowly rank begged admittance in order likewise to consecrate themselves to God's service.

Candida: I think I should almost have resented any others coming if I had been one of those seven friends

of holy Brigid. They must have been so united and happy together.

St. Blath: Our holy Mother was very far from being so selfish, and your remark shows that you have some distance to go, my good little Candida, before you reflect her spirit. *Her* only thought was to gain hearts and souls for Christ, and she welcomed with love and tenderness all who wished to consecrate themselves to Him.

Candida: What a dear Mother she must have been, and how quickly her spiritual family grew!

St. Blath: It grew so quickly that she was soon obliged to construct a larger building.

Candida: Without resources—I wonder how she was able to manage that. Did her father help her?

St. Blath: O no, Dubtach did not help her—indeed at this time he does not seem to have concerned himself in any way about his daughter. It was the charity and devotion of the people around her that made the good work possible; the rich brought gifts, the poor gave their work—above all, He who gives the increase gave His blessing.

Candida: It would seem that the pillar of fire seen at her birth and at her veiling was meant to foretell the quick spreading of her influence and the warmth of her Mother's love.

St. Blath: Yes, just as the miracle of the blossoming of the dry wood was to show the virtue that lay in

her touch as well as the virginal purity of her body and soul.

Candida: The virtue of her touch—do you mean by that, her touch worked miracles?

St. Blath: O yes, indeed it pleased the great God to show this very virtue of the touch of our holy Mother's hand at this time of the construction of her convent.

Candida: Pray, tell me how.

St. Blath: It happened that three poor and holy men, who were journeying that way, came to Brigid begging food and help. She entertained them, and when rested two of them went forth to help in the work of the building. Brigid remarked that one did not go and she said to him: "Why do you not go too, to work with the others?" "Because of my infirmity, having but one hand to serve me," said he. Brigid looked and saw indeed that one arm was maimed, and moved with pity she touched it and prayed, and behold! a strong and sound hand grew and the good man went forthwith to work, rendering thanks to God and blessing Brigid for the mercy shown him.

Candida: How beautiful it was, this quality of mercy, in the heart of our good Mother.

St. Blath: Yes, and I think you will not be surprised when I tell you that one day after she had heard Bishop Macaille preaching on the Beatitudes, she proposed that each one of the Sisters should take a Beatitude as the particular object of her devotion, and

she herself chose Mercy—Grace thus worked with nature, and so perfected this virtue in her, that it seemed, if I may so speak to have a compelling force to make God exercise His own infinite mercy towards the objects of her pity.

Candida: I can understand why she and her little community at Cruachan were loved. Tell me, did they remain long there?

St. Blath: After their religious training by the bishop, our holy Mother and her first seven companions left Cruachan. The fame of her sanctity had already spread, and her example was kindling the desire in the hearts of many young maidens to consecrate themselves to God apart from the world, and under the guidance of a religious rule. As I told you, there were consecrated virgins in our country before Brigid, but she was the first to form and guide a religious community.[3]

Candida: And those consecrated virgins whom you say preceded Brigid, were they many?

St. Blath: Surely they were many, because our great Patrick had been preaching for about twenty years before our holy Mother was born, and one of the first fruits of his preaching was the inspiration that came to numbers of young maidens to give up all for Christ.

Candida: Would it interrupt your story of holy Brigid to tell me something of those first consecrated virgins of Eire?

[3] This is the most general opinion.

St. Blath: It would rather take up too much time, and you know we have only leave to talk together that you might learn the story of our holy Mother—I will tell you, however, the names of some of those first chosen ones. There was Mathona, the sister of Benignus, Patrick's sweet-voiced choirmaster, and Erenait, the daughter of king Daire, and Eithna and Fidelm, the daughters of King Laoghaire.[4] The story of those maidens and how they came to be veiled by Patrick is most beautiful. I will tell it to you some day, meanwhile let us get back to Brigid and see her start on her first missionary journey in Eire.

Candida: How wonderful to think of her commencing such a great work as the founding of convents while she was still but a girl in years. Where did she go to first?

St. Blath: To Ardagh. Her own holy director Macaille accompanied her on her journey, and presented her to Bishop Mel, who reigned over the diocese of Ardagh at that time. Mel was a most saintly man consumed with zeal for God's glory, and he saw in Brigid's coming an occasion of an increase in that glory. He welcomed her with joy, and made her a gift of land near his church whereon to build her convent. Mel's joy was shared by all the people of Ardagh—they hailed the coming of the holy virgins as a benediction from heaven, and as Cruachan, they

[4] *The Tripartite Life of St. Patrick* says, when recording the death of these two princesses: "They were the first fruits that the Spouse took to Himself from all the land of Erin."

helped to build the house and to till the land around it.

Candida: I expect of all, it was the poor who rejoiced the most, to have Brigid at Ardagh.

St. Blath: Yes, for the poor, the sick and lowly were the objects of her greatest love. They knew this well, and they came in crowds from miles around. Brigid never refused them help, even if she had to go hungry herself, or if the community had to suffer for her prodigality.

Candida: And what did her nuns say to all that?

St. Blath: They shared her beautiful spirit of giving and never murmured. They knew very well, as you should know, my good little Candida, that charity, mercy and renouncement are the basis of our holy Mother's rule. You should remember, too, that Ardagh was founded with Brigid's first professed nuns, and all who joined were obliged to conform in everything to the strict observance established by our holy Mother.

Candida: And did many join?

St. Blath: Yes, very many, and from so many different parts of Eire, that Brigid judged that other foundations should be made. The bishops and people of other dioceses were calling her too, and thus began her great journeying through the Western, Northern and Southern provinces of the country. But that is enough for to-day. Next time I will tell you how that journeying was richly blessed by God, and how it was marked by wonderful happenings. God be

with you till our next meeting, and do not forget to try to imitate our blessed Mother as well as admiring her. You would like to resemble her, I am sure.

Candida: Yes, particularly in never growing old—that would be so pleasant, I think.

St. Blath: And pleasant for others too, for it would mean that your life was turned round—like the great world—by Love.

CONFERENCE III.

Holy Brigid's Journeying and Shepherding of Souls.

With thy comeliness and thy beauty, set out, proceed prosperously and reign.—Ps. xliv, 5.

Candida: God be with dear Sister; here I am, quite ready, if you are, to go on with our story of holy Brigid.

St. Blath: God and Mary be with you; you are welcome, child, but I did not expect to see you so soon, and I have still some work to finish in the kitchen.

Candida: I know I have come early, but I was so anxious to hear where our holy Mother went, and how she fared on her journeys, I hurried over my work. Indeed, I confess that I left Sister Bega to finish my sweeping!

St. Blath: What! And it was only the other day you said that you said you would like never to grow old!

Candida: Quite true, but I do not see how it could make me grow old to ask Sister Bega to finish my sweeping for me!

St. Blath: So you have forgotten how I told you that it was blessed Brigid's charity and unselfishness that kept her ever young and sweet. I am sure *she*

She touched the closed lids

would have never asked anyone to do her work for her!

Candida: But as she was so charitable I am sure she would have forgiven me my fault! And so will you, dear old Sister Blath—you will forgive me, and instead of sending me back to finish my sweeping, you will let me stay with you, and we will both go off together to meet our holy Mother on her travels.

St. Blath: I think the surest way to meet her is by doing our duty. But there! I have preached enough for this morning. You are forgiven. I know you love our holy Mother well, and I will not keep you waiting for our seanchus. I am thinking even we might have it beyond where the sheep are browsing, the day is so warm and fine.

Candida: O thank you, Sister, you are so good and kind it is no wonder our holy Mother loved you!

St. Blath: Surely it is no wonder—holy Brigid loved everyone. And now let us go out——

Candida: . . . . O, how good it is here, to hear the lambs bleating, and to feel the soft moist wind blowing while you tell me the story of our dear Mother.

St. Blath: To me she seems almost bodily present, so much a scene like this awakens memories of her. It was minding my own little flock I was when I first met her, and I could not reckon the times that I saw her out shepherding, even after she had become the great Abbess of Cill Dara.[1] It is as shepherding,

[1] St. Cumin of Connor in his life of our saint numbers "Blessed Brigid's love of shepherding" among her virtues and good works.

guarding, guiding and caring God's creatures great and small—I always think of her; sometimes it would be lambs, sometimes souls, sometimes scholars, but the work would always be the same.

Candida: How pleased I am that I was called into her fold.

St. Blath: All in Eire, as well as you, my little Sister, have the right to belong to Brigid's fold, and we should pray that none should be found missing in her flock when the day of reckoning comes. The great God must surely wish this since once He worked a great miracle to make good the number of her sheep.

Candida: How was that, pray?

St. Blath: It happened that one day a young man who was working on the convent farm conceived the evil idea of stealing seven of Brigid's sheep. He knew well the great charity of our holy Mother, so pretending that he gave them as a gift to the poor he hid them in a secret place. In the evening when the sheep were led back to the fold they were counted carefully as was usual, and by several persons. But, wonderful to say, the numbers were found to be the same as in the morning as if to prove that the poor had not been given any. This marvel so struck the thief with the fear of God, and he was so filled with admiration for the power given to holy Brigid that he brought back the seven stolen sheep, and upon the flock being counted anew, the exact same number was found—neither more nor less than at the first counting.

Candida: O Sister, what a beautiful story, and full of symbolic meaning.

St. Blath: I could tell you many more similar ones, but I find it is better this morning to keep to our plan of following holy Brigid on her travels. We left her last time, starting from Ardagh.

Candida: Do you know how long she stayed at Ardagh?

St. Blath: She must have stayed there ten or twelve years, so as well as the seven virgins who came with her from Cruachan, there were many others perfectly trained in the religious life at the time of her departure. Some she left at Ardagh, some she chose to accompany her, and others she gave as precious stones of foundation for the new convents.

Candida: And where were those new convents?

St. Blath: In Connacht where her mission prospered exceedingly. Very soon the newly founded convents were filled with fervent communities. Gentle and simple, young maidens came from every side begging to be numbered in Brigid's holy company. At Hui[2] alone she founded several convents which became havens of prayer and praise to God, and havens of refuge for the poor, the sick and the afflicted. The sisterhood also instructed the ignorant and concerned themselves with the spiritual needs of the people. Thus innumerable souls were brought into the Church and Christ's kingdom spread in Eire.

[2] Roscommon.

Candida: Our holy Mother must have had plenty of consolations in those days.

St. Blath: Yes, her mission in Connacht was wonderfully fruitful. I think, sometimes, that all those religious vocations must have been a grace that Eithna and Fidelm obtained for the province, for it was there that they met Patrick, and there they were baptized and veiled by him.[3] You know they died immediately after their consecration to Christ, so they were like the good seed that is cast into the ground, and afterwards yields its hundred fold.

Candida: It was as if Patrick planted and Brigid watered the garden of the Church in Eire, was it not?

St. Blath: Yes, but both knew well that it was God who gave the increase, and they were never touched with vain glory when their mission prospered so marvellously, neither were they moved by the praises of men.

Candida: Holy Brigid's great worth was then recognised outside her own flock?

St. Blath: O yes, she was not long in Connacht before she became the most famous personage there. Everyone, even pagans, recognised that she was greater than any other woman who had ever wielded power in Eire. Kings and princes saw in her a benefactress of their people; bishops a helpmate in their missionary work as well as a model of sanctity of life. But

[3] At their father's palace at Cruachan, and they were buried at Oge-ulad ("the grave mound of the Virgins") in Co. Roscommon.

Connacht was not to keep her always. Ulster and Munster called her, so she set out once more on her journeying. She first went north then south, so that soon there was scarce a spot in all Eire that had not benefited by her holy presence.

Candida: Always travelling and having to start off just when she was becoming accustomed to a place—that must have meant many sacrifices for our holy Mother.

St. Blath: Yes, but that did not trouble her—you remember how I told you that it was making sacrifices that kept her young and happy. Then she had the joy of making many friendships in those days, for on her journeys she visited many holy virgins and anchorites who had long been anxious to see her—she accepted too the hospitality of ecclesiastics who wished to talk with her, and to consult her on spiritual and other matters.

Candida: O, how pleased and proud I am that our holy mother—the one time little girl who made butter in the stranger's house—was so honoured!

St. Blath: In truth God had dealt wonderfully with her. But remark how it is always the same Brigid—kind and merciful and trusting in the " Prince " Who never failed her.

Candida: Tell me, Sister, did our holy Mother never suffer from the opposition of the wicked on her long journeys, and in her work of founding convents?

St. Blath: It happened some few times that the

Adversary tried to bring discredit on her work, or to draw away the hearts of those who had consecrated themselves to Christ. The Evil One and his friends, however, always found themselves worsted when they took up arms against Brigid, or offered her any disrespect. There is a good example of this in an incident which happened on our holy Mother's homeward journey to Leinster after her missionary travels. If you like I will tell you the story.

Candida: Of course, I should like to hear it!

St. Bliath: Well, when Brigid and some of her companions reached Ath Luain they asked a boatman to row them across the river Shannon, so that they might continue their voyage. He asked to be paid for doing this service, and so highly that Brigid said she would walk through the water rather than yield to his unreasonable demand. Hearing this word, the crowd which had gathered near set up a great laughing and mocking, for the Shannon was greatly swollen, and it seemed certain drowning awaited any one rash enough to venture crossing on foot. Then one of the Sisters turned to our dear Mother and begged her to confound those people by showing how God would answer her prayer for help. She then prayed and blessed the water, and lo! they decreased immediately, and the holy little company walked in safety to the opposite bank.

Candida: O, how I wish I had been there! It would have given me such pleasure to see the amazement and the discomfiture of those wicked people!

St. Blath: I am quite sure that the only thing that gave Blessed Brigid pleasure was that the glory of God was increased by the marvel. She did not seek the discomfiture of creatures, but only the discomfiture of the Adversary, and once she expressed her joy very openly when he was routed in a fight he made to deprive her of one of her daughters.

Candida: How was that—do tell me, Sister.

St. Blath: The Evil One assailed a Sister with a violent temptation to leave her convent, and to abandon the life she had vowed. She rose, then, in night thinking to steal unnoticed from the house, but Brigid knew by inspiration what was passing, and she prayed earnestly that the enemy might be cheated of his hoped-for prey. At the same moment a great fear of God and of Brigid seized the soul of the Sister, and yielding to a sudden impulse—an impulse prompted by God I have no doubt—she thrust her feet in a brazier of live coals in order to burn her feet, and thus prevent herself from walking. When morning came she confessed to Brigid what had happened, but our holy Mother only answered gently: "I can promise you my daughter, that this burning will merit you immunity from eternal fire." She then made the Sign of the Cross on the Sister's feet, and all pain and trace of burning instantly disappeared, and they rejoiced together in the Lord for all His mercies.

Candida: God between us and harm! That is a beautiful, but at the same time, a terrifying story.

St. Blath: You asked me if holy Brigid ever met

with opposition from the wicked, what more wicked than the Enemy who suggests evil deeds—that is why I told you the story.

Candida: Thank you, Sister, but I think I prefer stories that are consoling all the way through. You spoke of some friendships that our holy Mother had. Will you tell me something about them?

St. Blath: Yes and welcome, but no words can convey what friendship with Brigid meant—it had the beautiful qualities of tenderness, warmth and devotedness, but so supernaturalized was it, that it brought relief to the souls as well as comfort to the hearts of her friends. Brigid, you must know was a skilled guide of souls, and many outside her own communities sought her direction. Thus she formed a life-long friendship with a holy virgin named Brega, whom she met on one of her missionary journeys, and thus she became the soul-friend of the superiors of other communities who begged her to visit their convents that they might profit by her conversation. Brigid never refused when the call came. She went shepherding wherever she was wanted, and she always brought a blessing with her; sometimes it would be a bodily cure she would work for a suffering Sister—sometimes it would be a deliverance from a spiritual infirmity. Her heart went out to everyone in trouble, and God always answered her prayer because of her faith in Him, and because of the trust that others placed in her.[4]

[4] ". . . . everything that Brigid would ask the Lord was granted to her at once. For this was her desire—to satisfy the poor, to expel every hardship, to spare every miserable man."—*Book of Lismore.*

Candida: When her visits brought such blessings, how happy those who lived with her must have been! I wish *I* had been one of her community.

St. Blath: You think, perhaps, that she would have miraculously cured you of all your little weaknesses? I do not think it would have been so. Her miracles were never wrought to get something that could be obtained by hard work. But it is true that great peace and happiness reigned in her convents, and, as you can understand, some of the sweetest friendships of her life were between her and her own spiritual daughters.

Candida: Did you, yourself, know any of these favoured ones, Sister?

St. Blath: Yes, some few, Darlua and Daire, for example, for they were both in her convent of Cill Dara. Darlua had been carefully trained in holiness by Brigid whom she loved most tenderly. She could not bear the thought of separation from her, and when our dear Mother's death seemed near, she prayed that she might die the same day.

Candida: Ah! it comforts me to know that holy souls have human feelings like that! I hope Brigid obtained for Darlua her wish?

St. Blath: No, on the contrary, she told her that she must succeed her as Abbess of Cill Dara, and continue the work of government of her other convents for a year. And so it fell out. Darlua was second Abbess of Cill Dara, and just one year later she joined her loved Mother and friend in heaven.

Candida: Perhaps she was all the more pleased to meet holy Brigid for having had to wait the year!

St. Blath: You mean for having done God's will. You can console yourself also my little Sister with the thought that Darlua had happiness on earth during that year, for it gave her the opportunity of proving her love by self-sacrifice—the only true test of love!

Candida: O thank you, Sister. I see there is always something to learn from the stories of our holy Mother. And now tell me about Daire.

St. Blath: Ah! the story of Daire is one of the most touching of all the stories I know. But I had meant to keep it for the day I had set apart in my mind for the telling of Brigid's miracles—as two great miracles come into the story.

Candida: But as we are talking of our blessed Mother's friendships, would it not be just as well to tell it now—I am longing to hear it.

St. Blath: Well, Daire was a native of Leinster. She had been blind from her birth, but that did not prevent holy Brigid from receiving her into her community, for she knew her great virtue. She was gentle and cheerful, and always managed to find occupation notwithstanding her infirmity, and she was noted for her great love of prayer. Our holy Mother would often confer with her on spiritual things, and one day it happened that they were sitting together talking of heavenly things just at the moment when the dawn began to break in the sky. The sight of so much beauty—the colours and lights in the sky and the

radiance gradually flooding the earth, so moved the soul of our dear Mother that she cried out in joy and praise: *O how the heavens show forth the glory of God and the firmament declareth the works of His hands.*[5] But Daire, who could not see the beauty around her, began to weep, and for a moment she almost doubted God's goodness since He had deprived her of her sight. Brigid's heart was touched and full of confidence she raised her eyes to Him whose throne is above the firmament and Who has said of Himself "I am the Light of the world," and she begged Him to open Daire's eyes. Then she touched the closed lids and behold! the sightless eyes were opened, and Daire saw the beauty of the skies and the earth and God's creation—the beauty and the grace, too, of the dear Mother of her soul.

Candida: O Sister, you spoke truly when you said Daire's story was beautiful and wonderful. What joy and thankfulness she must have felt when she saw all that beauty for the first time.

St. Blath: Yes, but soon she became sensible of other feelings as well as joy—feelings as new and strange to her as the sight of the beauty of the world. Her heart was agitated, her mind was filled with a thousand distractions, and her soul was assailed by temptations unknown to her before. God seemed further from her, and the contemplation of heavenly things more difficult.

Candida: I never thought that anything like that might happen. What did poor Daire do?

St. Blath: She sought her beloved Abbess, told her

[5] Ps. xviii, 1.

of her troubled soul, and begged her to blind her again. Brigid understood, and making the Sign of the Cross on her daughter's eyes, Daire became sightless as before—choosing to live in darkness till the moment when the Eternal Beauty would be revealed to her in perpetual light.

Candida: Praise be to God! It takes courage to get to heaven! Continue, I beg your stories of Brigid's soul-friends.

St. Blath: There was Braigue, one of our holy Mother's first and most loved followers, and whom she often visited in her convent at Magh Breag. Braigue, however, did not hesitate to distance herself from her loved Superior when God's service seemed to demand it, for she crossed the sea and worked and died in exile. Then there were her own two little sisters, Bronach and Blinne[6] whom she trained in the religious life. Both afterwards founded churches and convents, and shared their sister's skill in government. Brigid had also many friendships with holy men—bishops and ecclesiastics of various degrees. I shall tell you about them another time—perhaps at our next meeting when I mean to tell you about the great Abbess of Cill Dara. Already we have wandered away from where we were with our holy Mother on her travels. Happily she was just turning homewards, for I should not have had time to tell you more to-day. Indeed, I think that we have spent more than our hour's time together already—and we have yet to gather the sheep

6 Though popular tradition speaks of Saints Bronach and Blinne as "sisters," it is more likely that they were only sisters in religion. In South-east Ulster these two holy virgins have always shared, with Brigid, the people's devotion.

into the fenced run till the next Sister comes to watch them.

Candida: Ah! how the time passes quickly when we are doing something pleasant! And, do you know Sister, I am almost sad to think that it is as a great Abbess we are now to see our dear Mother. She was so sweet in her childhood and early youth.

St. Blath: Have no fear. The more you know about Brigid the better you will love her—and then, you should be anything but sad to see her returning to her own Cill Dara. It was her country people who called her back. They were proud and happy that her mission had so prospered in other parts of Eire, but they had not forgotten that she was one of themselves, and they entreated her to make Cill Dara the permanent place of her dwelling: "Choose," said they, "the fairest and most fertile spot in the land, and it shall belong to you and yours for ever. We will build for you and care for you and protect you. Come and deny us no longer the joy of your presence." Brigid, however, did not accept the invitation at once —indeed they had to repeat it many times before she consented to come.

Candida: But why?

St. Blath: Because she had to consult God first in earnest prayer. His will was the only thing that concerned her, and if He had shown her that another territory was to be more particularly the place of her shepherding she would just as willingly have worked there, and just as lovingly tended its sheep.

Candida: I am very thankful all the same that it was our country God chose for her special care. But tell me, Sister, what part did her father, the Chief Dubtach, take about the return of his daughter to his country? You know I never liked him.

St. Blath: He desired her presence as did everyone else, and Brigid, not like you, had nothing in her heart but forgiveness and charity for him—a striking miracle proves this, and I will tell it to you next day. Now, just one word more, and our talk must really finish for to-day. We were speaking of holy Brigid's friends, and her tenderness and charity for the chosen souls whom she directed. But there were others whom I think more than any should be called her friends, and for whom she had the liveliest affection. Perhaps you can guess who these favourites were.

Candida: The poor?

St. Blath: Yes, and let me tell you, my little Sister, that your prompt answer gives me real consolation, for it shows that my story is bringing you understanding of our holy Mother's heart.

Candida: I can tell you too, my dear old Sister, the reason why blessed Brigid loved the poor above all others. It was because she saw in them more particularly the Christ: I have not forgotten what she said to her father when he scolded her for giving away his sword to the poor leper: "I gave it to Christ, and the Son of Mary knows that had I your power with all the riches of Leinster I would give it to the God of the Elements."

Brigid called out to Ninnidh, "Why do you run so fast?"

CONFERENCE IV.

THE GREAT ABBESS OF CILL DARA.

Many daughters have gathered together riches; thou hast surpassed them all.—Prov. xxxi, 29.

Candida: A blessing on the work! How can you look so calm and recollected, Sister, I want to know, with your spinning-wheel whirling like that, and your hands never idle an instant!

St. Blath: It is not so difficult as you think, little one. What I do is *outside* of me, what I think is *inside* of me. If my mind is fixed on the eternal, unchanging God, the movements of my fingers cannot scatter my thoughts.

Candida: My fingers interfere a lot with my thoughts, and my thoughts with my fingers too!

St. Blath: Because you let them. A little practice and patience and you will be able to keep them both in their proper place. Holy Brigid will help you, too. She excelled all others whom I have ever met in the practice of recollection.[1]

Candida: But our holy Mother's mind was very calm, was it not, Sister?

[1] O'Clery's *Martyrology* says of St. Brigid: "She did not take her mind or attention from the Lord for the space of one hour at any time, but was constantly mentioning Him and ever constantly thinking of Him."

St. Blath: Yes, calm and strong, but also joyous and alert. Look out yonder at the plain of Cill Dara. See how it is broad and open and sunny—not shaken with the storms nor beaten by the waves like the western sea-board, nor yet is it unsheltered from the play of the winds. Brigid's mind was like her own beautiful country of Cill Dara.

Candida: Ah! how you seem to love them both!

St. Blath: I do indeed love them, and all the incidents of our Mother's home-coming are so graven on my memory, young as I was at the time, that it will be easy to tell them to you this morning. But what do you say to a little practice at training your fingers to work while you keep your mind fixed on higher things? I will tell my story while I do some carding; you can listen to me and at the same time search and pick out any specks of dust or fibre that may remain in the wool after my carding.

Candida: Whatever you like—only please do not keep me waiting any longer for your story. Last day you said you would tell me about a miracle which Brigid in her charity worked for her father when she first returned to Cill Dara. What was it?

St. Blath: I must tell you first that on her return to his territory Dubtach welcomed his daughter with royal honours. He recognised now that she was the most precious jewel that his family possessed, and he begged her and her companions to honour him by sleeping under his roof for one night.

Candida: He did that because he saw how others esteemed and honoured her!

St. Blath: How do you know? He might have received many graces and lights since Brigid's childhood. But, pray allow me to finish my story. Our holy Mother consented to Dubtach's desire, and spent the night in his house. During her sleep an angel of the Lord appeared to her and said: "Arise and warn your father and his family and your virgins that an enemy is approaching who wishes to kill your father and his family, but for your sake God does not wish to permit this. Go forth, for the house will be burnt." Brigid then warned the household and they went forth, and when they had gone some distance they looked back and saw indeed that the enemy had burnt the house. Dubtach then blessed both God and Brigid for his preservation. "True, indeed," said he, "were the great things foretold of you at your birth," and Brigid answered in a prophecy: "Not only this night but for ever. No blood shall ever be shed in your house."

Candida: That is surely a gracious story.

St. Blath: There are many other stories of her intercourse with angels: she used to say that she frequently heard them singing, and that they helped her in her work.

Candida: How wonderful!

St. Blath: Why? Brigid was entirely the servant of God—it is not astonishing then, that the angels who

are His ministers[2] should wish to help her in her service of their Master. But we were talking of Dubtach's relations with his daughter, so I will tell you another story. It shows how he felt himself completely forgiven as he asked our holy Mother to render him a service.

Candida: How could he have dared to do such a thing!

St. Blath: Perhaps because he had a simple soul! He asked Brigid to go to the king of Leinster and beg that he might keep a very precious sword that the king had once lent him. She obeyed unhesitatingly and obtained her request. The king, however, asked her to render him a service in return. That is almost another story, but I will tell it to you as it shows how our holy Mother could be condescending to a pagan who had not the light to judge as a Christian. When she was on her way to the Dun by the Liffey one of the king's servitors ran forward and begged her to obtain his freedom: "If you get me this favour," said he "I and my family will become Christians, and we will be your servants for ever." Brigid promised, and when she came into the king's presence she boldly asked him the two favours. "Great are the favours you ask me, O nun," said the king, "if I grant them what will you give me in return?" "I will pray that after your death your soul may have life everlasting," replied Brigid. "Ah," said the king, "a life that I see not, nor know not, I ask not;

[2] Bless the Lord, all ye his hosts: ye ministers of his who do his will.—Ps. cii, 21.

obtain for me rather a long life on earth, and victory over my enemies."

Candida: And is it possible that she consented to pray for such things for him?

St. Blath: Yes, for she wished that his kindness should obtain some reward, even a temporal one. And it fell out as she prayed; the king enjoyed a long life and constant victory over his enemies.

Candida: I find all your stories beautiful, Sister. And now tell me is the place where the convent stands to-day the same as that our holy Mother first chose?

St. Blath: Yes, it was beneath the great oak that now stands behind the monastery that she built her first oratory. She had a particular love for that tree, and even blessed it. That is why its wood often works miracles now when touched with faith in God and Brigid's intercession, and it is because of her blessing that no one dares to cut it.[3]

Candida: She chose well did our holy Mother. It was a noble site that great plain by the Liffey, and I love to think her eyes rested on it so often. But covered as it is now with cells, with its great school, and so full of life and movement, I find it hard to picture it as it was when Brigid first chose it for her monastery.

[3] Cogitosus, in his 8th century *Life of St. Brigid,* says that the trunk of the tree still stood in his time, and the Monk Animosus, who wrote two centuries later, declared that it was even still to be seen in his time. The County of Kildare = Cill Dara, is said to have taken its name from Brigid's Church or Cill by this oak tree. The district was known before as Druim Criaidh.

St. Blath: You would be still more astonished if you had seen how quickly all that life grew up and spread. And all that you see now is due to our dear Mother. It was she who made Cill Dara great—who drew those numberless virgins to her cells, the students to the school, and the monks to the monastery in her city. It was through her too that the See of Cill Dara was founded.

Candida: How was that?

St. Blath: When Brigid saw how wonderfully her religious establishments in Cill Dara had prospered, and the crowds that came to her seeking guidance and instruction both in spiritual and temporal affairs, she felt that she should have the support of a pontiff who would govern and guide with her, and who would also supply her with a clergy for the discharge of all ecclesiastical functions in her city.

Candida: How wise and thoughtful she was!

St. Blath: Yes, but holiness was what she first sought for in the bishop who would govern her little world, and her thoughts turned to Conlaeth, who at that time was living as a hermit not very far away, and who was preparing himself all unknowingly by a life of prayer and penance for the high office of first Bishop and first Abbot of Cill Dara.

Candida: How happy they must have been, working together for God's glory! Did our holy Mother have Conlaeth's help all through the rest of her life?

St. Blath: Almost, as his death took place, if my

memory serves me well, only about four years before that of Brigid.

Candida: Did you know him, too?

St. Blath: Yes, for sometimes my dear Mother would bid me come from my convent, you know I was not always with her at Cill Dara, and then I would see Conlaeth and get his blessing and hear him preach. Holy Brigid was always most desirous that her daughters should become thoroughly familiar with Christian doctrine, and she herself, according to the direction given her in her novitiate, never took food before having heard the Word of God expounded to her. I could tell you many stories of Bishop Conlaeth's miracles and virtues, and the perfect understanding that existed between these two great souls—but our permission to talk together is for the telling of Brigid's story not Conlaeth's.

Candida: But they were so united in their work, it will be almost the same to tell me about him too, and I like stories so much.

St. Blath: You know well how to plead, I see! Well, first let me tell you that in common with our holy Mother, Conlaeth had a great zeal for the beauty of God's house, and the sacred ceremonies. He fashioned himself chalices in gold and silver; patens and bells too, not only for Cill Dara, but for other churches and monasteries under his care. Indeed, it was through his instruction and encouragement that the School of Cill Dara became so famous for its beautiful work,

and we of his country should love and venerate him for all he did for us.

Candida: Our Cill Dara was certainly blessed in its Father and Mother, and I think Bishop Conlaeth must have been very proud of his great church.

St. Blath: He laboured most incessantly for it, and carried it, if I may so speak, in his heart wherever he went. Thus, on one occasion when he went on a pilgrimage to visit the tombs of the holy Apostles at Rome he took care to bring back with him a supply of most magnificent vestments for its use. Brigid received the gift with gratitude. It was her delight to use precious things in God's service, and she loved everything beautiful. But one day—it was a time of distress and suffering in the country—she did not hesitate to distribute those same precious vestments among the poor that they might exchange them for food and clothing.[4]

Candida: And her bishop was not angry?

St. Blath: No; for, like Brigid, he saw Christ in the person of the poor.

Candida: They did, indeed, understand each other well.

St. Blath: Yes, and both were equal in their trust in Providence to supply the wants of their communities, so strict orders were given that no one should ever be turned away from the door of the monastery. The

[4] Cogitosus relates that the vestments were miraculously restored to the Church.

poor, the miserable and the sick knew this well, and they came in crowds seeking our holy Mother's help. I have seen her even at night rise to serve herself some poor creature in want, or out of mercy to open her door to some offender, for her monastery had the privilege of sanctuary, and all were safe within its holy walls.

Candida: She practised well the beatitude of mercy, she chose as virtue in her early religious life.

St. Blath: Yes, and her gracious sweet way inspired trust in all. Rough men—sinners sometimes, or perhaps it might be pagans who received the grace to seek instruction in the Christian faith, would come without fear, and open their hearts to the Abbess of Cill Dara; little innocent children would run to her for the comfort of a kind word or to hear her tell the story of Mary and her Little Child, or perhaps just for the joy of being lifted in her arms.

Candida: She thought perhaps of the time when *she* was a little child, and the world used her harshly.

St. Blath: Perhaps—I only know that all children loved her as a mother.

Candida: Everything you tell me about her makes me love her more. Please continue, Sister, to tell me about the life at her monastery of Cill Dara.

St. Blath: The duties of the community were most varied, but of all the Sisterhood, I think our holy Abbess was the busiest. As well as all the works of mercy I have told you of and the administration of

her monastery, she assisted Bishop Conlaeth in the great school which was founded in her city. It was her custom to concern herself personally with the pupils who crowded there and to encourage them in whatever direction their talents lay. And the talents of the pupils were very varied. For some it would be designing sacred vessels in gold and silver, for others it would be illuminating manuscripts. Brigid helped all and also guided in the spiritual life young students for the priesthood or others of the Sons of Reading who came to Cill Dara for study and holy living.

Candida: How they must all have loved her!

St. Blath: They did indeed love her, and the students always counted their days at the school of Cill Dara as the happiest of their life. Sometimes it was given to holy Brigid to have miraculous lights about the future of those same Sons of Reading. Do you know the story of Ninnidh of the Clean Hand?

Candida: No, but I know it was he who administered the Holy Viaticum to Brigid when she was dying.

St. Blath: I will tell you his story. It is one you are sure to like. Ninnidh was a young scholar who came from the north to study at the School of Cill Dara. He was lively and quick-witted, but was not remarkable for piety or for respect for his elders. One day it happened that when Brigid was out on the plain herding, Ninnidh came rushing past her. He had pulled up his tunic so that he could run the faster, and several times, as if for amusement, he crossed her, and altogether he seemed to behave in

a very giddy manner. At last, Brigid called out to him: "Why do you run so fast?" "Because I am running to heaven," said he jestingly. "Ah," said our holy Mother, "the Son of the Virgin knows that he is happy who makes that journey. But will you not pause and pray with me that it may be easy for *me* to go to heaven?" "O Nun," said Ninnidh still jokingly, "if I pause the gates of heaven now open may be shut against me." But Brigid was not to be put off with the boy's levity. She insisted, and at last Ninnidh knelt down, and they made a prayer together that both might run swiftly to the kingdom of heaven. Then our holy Mother said to him. "You will be a priest, and moreover, at the time of my passing, it is from your hand that I shall receive the Holy Viaticum." And all fell out as she foretold—Ninnidh became a holy priest, and ever afterwards kept his right hand covered in a case of metal, so that the hand that was to administer the Holy Viaticum to Brigid, might never be defiled.

Candida: What a touching sight it must have been—holy Brigid and the little boy on their knees on the plain, praying that it might be given to both of them to make a good journey to heaven! And the humility of the great Abbess! herding the sheep like a simple sister!

St. Blath: Humility was one of Brigid's most marked virtues—humility in mind and in action. She would gather and carry a load of sticks to some poor family and kindle a fire for them with her own hands, she would wash the feet of the lowliest pilgrim who came

to Cill Dara, and how many times I have seen the surprise of the great who came to visit the monastery when they heard that the great Abbess was off herding the sheep—in cold and rain perhaps—on the plain by the Liffey.

Candida: The great then came to visit her?

St. Blath: Yes, princes and chiefs and high dignitaries were constant visitors to Cill Dara. Holy Brigid delighted in exercising hospitality, especially to bishops, and her practice must have been very pleasing to God, for frequently He would furnish her miraculously with food wherewith to entertain her guests.

Candida: Was that what you meant when you said that she and Bishop Conlaeth never hesitated to give abundant charity, knowing that divine Providence would come to their aid?

St. Blath: Yes, sometimes by miracles, and often by the gifts which the great were inspired to make to the monastery. These gifts were of various kinds—food, raiment, cattle and precious objects for the church. Crimthann's queen was one who thought it an honour to give gifts to Cill Dara, and I myself saw a beautiful silver chain with a silver apple hanging from it, which she gave Brigid. It pleased Providence, however, to test our dear Mother's faith sometimes, and owing to her lavish giving the monastery would be in want. This never disturbed the Sisterhood, and they would wait cheerfully till some benefactor would send them relief, or the God of Miracles would see fit Himself to increase their store.

Candida: They knew then what penance and hardship was at the great Abbey.

St. Blath: Most certainly. Holy Brigid's rule, as you know, has for basis prayer, fasting and work, and the rule was practised with heroic perfection at Cill Dara. I can tell you, my little Candida, you would never have had time to idle if you had our holy Mother for Abbess.

Candida: I wonder what she would have given me to do!

St. Blath: She would have soon found out your capabilities and deficiencies, and like the wise kind ruler she was, she would not have put you to uncongenial work. The service of the poor was, of course, common to all, and all accomplished this duty with joy and thankfulness. Simple work also, like tending the flocks, and weaving the wool into cloth for their habits, and for clothing for the poor, was undertaken by all the Sisters, but other work like designing sacred vessels, illuminating and copying manuscripts, embroidering church vestments, and instructing the ignorant, was chosen for each religious according to her natural abilities. With holy Brigid, it was not high or humble birth that decided the occupation, but the welfare of the monastery and the spiritual interests of her daughters.

Candida: Serving the poor and tending the flocks out there on the plain—*that* is what I should have liked best.

St. Blath: You would have had the happiness of

being often in holy Brigid's company, for she loved those two employments. That, however, did not prevent her from being most skilled in artistic work. You have seen the beautiful illuminated manuscript of the Four Evangelists with its exquisite colours and intricate design? Brigid supervised that work herself, and helped in it, and if I mistake not its beauty will be the marvel of men for all time.

Candida: God was indeed lavish in His gifts to our holy Mother.

St. Blath: Yes, and she had no other desire but to give them back to Him in serving His creatures. And now, little one, I think I have told you all I know about the life at Cill Dara in Brigid's day. Much must be left untold, for no words can express the beauty of the supernatural life in the monastery, its spirit of prayer, the peace that pervaded all, and the christianizing influence of Brigid's charity and mercy. Before her time our people knew what natural virtues were—hospitality, justice, magnanimity—kindness even they had seen practised. But humility, meekness, mercy and forgiveness they saw practised for the first time in the daily lives of the Christians in Brigid's City. They saw and felt that the new order was higher and greater than the old, and they sought knowledge of Brigid's God, and turned to serve Him whose holiness and beauty they saw reflected in the life of His servant.

Candida: What glory she must have earned for God!

St. Blath: And earns still, and ever will I am convinced, for surely through the ages her example will

inspire thousands of our countrywomen to consecrate themselves to Christ, and seek no other interest but the extension of His Kingdom on earth.

Candida: All you tell me Sister, makes me so thankful for being one of our holy mother's spiritual daughters. I must really try to be good, and I am sure my talks with you will help me. Just look how beautifully I have picked the wool while I listened to your story! That shows that I have profited by your advice, not to let the work of my hands interfere with keeping my attention fixed on higher things.

St. Blath: A blessing on all your good intentions, child, and may everything you do and wish rise up with you. If listening to the story of holy Brigid encourages you, it will be time well spent. I have still many wonderful things to tell you, but for to-day our talk must end.

Candida: I would like above all things to spend the whole of our next hour together, in listening to nothing but stories about Brigid—I mean miracles worked by her prayers and other wonderful things. What do you say, Sister?

St. Blath: I say that with all my heart I will gratify your wish—for I know what pleasure it will give you.

CONFERENCE V.

Some of the Wonders and Miracles Wrought for Holy Brigid.

Praise ye the Lord of lords . . . .
Who alone doeth great wonders.—Ps. cxxxv, 3-4.

Candida: God be with you, Sister!

St. Blath: And God and Mary with you, my little one! You have come no doubt for your story. But how is it you are so early? They told me the young Sisters would be out all the morning turning the ground for the sowing.

Candida: We had to cease as the day was too soft. Just look at the state my habit is in, and it is so heavy with rain that I can scarcely carry it!

St. Blath: I have often seen our holy Mother at such work, and not a speck of dirt on her. The great cleanliness of her person and garments spoke to all of the purity of her soul, and the God of the Elements was pleased, I think, that it should be so, for sometimes. He would deign to work a miracle to keep her habit white and spotless.

Candida: Did you ever see a wonder like that worked for her?

St. Blath: Yes, one day a poor man came to her begging food. Brigid, with her usual charity hastened

The birds came at her call

off at once to seek some for him. But the servitor from whom she asked it, far from being urged by the same charity, was irritated at her request, and threw most churlishly a piece of raw meat at her. Brigid said no word, but meekly carried it to the beggar. She rejoiced rather at the humiliation, but great was the servant's confusion to see that his wicked action was openly reproved by God, for the meat did not leave a trace of soiling on her white habit!

Candida: Thanks be to God! That is the sort of story I like above all others—I mean I like to hear of our holy Mother being honoured to the confusion of wicked people.

St. Blath: Say rather that you like to see God's power made manifest in the person of His servant. But there! I know you mean well, and I must not catch you up too quickly in your words. Shake out your cloak before the kitchen fire—holy Brigid did not always have that same for drying *her* cloak, but we must be thankful for that, otherwise we should never have had the beautiful story of the miraculous sunbeam.

Candida: What miraculous sunbeam?

St. Blath: You don't know that story? Everyone should know it, so sit down and I will tell it to you before the other stories I had settled to tell you today. It is still blowing and raining, so we will have our seanchus within. And now for the sunbeam! One day our holy Mother was out on the pasture with her sheep during a very heavy rain. When she returned

to the monastery she wished to dry her cloak, but she found there was no fire. She paused for a moment considering what she would do, when suddenly the sun shot a ray through an opening in the wall. Brigid, dazzled by the light thought she saw a rafter of wood traversing the room, and in all simplicity went to hang her cloak upon it! Then God—all things, remember, are possible to Him—was pleased to work a great miracle to help His servant. He gave strength to the sunbeam, and to the wonder and admiration of all the cloak remained suspended from it as from some solid substance, till it was dry!

Candida: God be praised! What a mighty miracle! There is no fear that I shall ever forget *that* story.

St. Blath: All God's works are wonderful, and all are equally easy for Him. The reason that story is so astonishing *to us* is that He was pleased to give the sunbeam a power that exceeded the powers of nature. But think for a moment, child, about those same powers of nature. Are they not too, most wonderful and admirable?

Candida: O yes, and many things in nature puzzle me so much. For instance it is so mysterious that a flower with its colour and perfume, and even a big tree with its fruit, can all come out of a little seed. It is really miraculous, I think.

St. Blath: No, such things are not miraculous, they are only wonderful and admirable. Listen a moment and I will tell you why. The blossoming of a flower or the coming of a fruit from a seed are in

accordance with the known laws of nature. The seed only performs a natural act by means of the power God gave it. But the drying of holy Brigid's cloak on the sunbeam was a miracle, because it was in opposition to the laws of nature, and exceeded the powers of nature. I am glad you spoke your thoughts, for it is useful for you to know those things before our talk this morning about the different kinds of miracles God worked through our holy Mother. Some of these miracles were very wonderful, and some seem greater than others, but remember that all is the same to the Almighty, and the most wonderful and extraordinary things are as easy to Him as the most simple and ordinary things to us.

Candida: O thank you, Sister. I knew *that* but not all you told me about miracles. How did *you* come to know those things?

St. Blath: You forget that Brigid had many learned and holy men to instruct her and the Sisterhood—the Bishops Mel and Nadfraoich and Conlaeth, and she would often talk to us of Christian doctrine. I believe, too, that because of her simplicity and purity of heart many lights were given to her when listening to God's word.[1]

Candida: I believe everything you tell me, Sister Blath, and now for our holy Mother's miracles. I am longing to hear about them.

St. Blath: I know you are. I know too, that though

[1] The declaration of Thy words giveth light=
It giveth understanding to little ones.—Ps. cxviii, 130.

you call them *our holy Mother's miracles*, you understand that they were worked, through her by Him whom she called her Prince and her Friend the day long ago when the butter was multiplied for her in the Druid's dairy.

Candida: O yes, I quite understand. The great God used Brigid as the dispenser of His favours and graces, just as a king uses a favourite servant. All the same it was because of her holiness He did those things—was it not?

St. Blath: He did them first for His own glory, and then for Brigid's sake. I think too, to show how pleasing her virtues of mercy and charity were to Him, for many of His miracles were wrought in favour of the poor. Often food would be miraculously increased when Brigid had not enough to feed the hungry who crowded to her door, and one day a marvel of another kind was wrought to aid her in her works of mercy. You remember, do you not, the silver chain that Crimthann's queen gave her?

Candida: Yes, with the silver apple hanging from it.

St. Blath: Well, that chain was put in the treasury of the church, but one day some poor people coming to ask charity, Brigid cut the chain and divided it among them so that they might get food and clothing in exchange. Hearing this one of the Sisters said complainingly: "O Mother, we lose everything that kind friends give us, through your excessive charity to the poor." But Brigid said simply: "Go my daughter, and look in the chest, and perhaps you will

find it." The Sister went as desired, and lo! a chain entire and exactly the same as the one our holy Mother had cut was lying in the chest! I need not tell you the Sister was much ashamed of her want of confidence in God and in her Abbess, and she humbly begged pardon, whereupon Brigid pronounced these beautiful words: "If we give the earth to God, He will give us both heaven and earth."

Candida: What a beautiful story!

St. Blath: There are many other stories of the wonderful restoration of things through Brigid's prayer, and always for the sake of the poor and friendless. One day, for instance, she went to visit a holy virgin who lived in solitude, and whose sole riches consisted of one cow and one calf. The virgin wished to make a repast for our holy Mother, so she got the calf killed. But as she had no wood with which to make a fire to cook the meat, she took and burnt the frame of her spinning-wheel! When Brigid arrived at her dwelling and saw what had been done to entertain her, her heart was touched, and she prayed that the virgin might not lose those things which she had so generously used for her entertainment. God was pleased to answer her prayer, and next day a calf similar to the one that had been killed was seen following the cow, and a spinning wheel, whole and undamaged, exactly the same as the one that had been burnt was found in its accustomed place!

Candida: God be praised and thanked for all His goodness!

St. Blath: Blessed Brigid's love of hospitality was also often rewarded by the miraculous increase or restoration of food. But it would be impossible for me to relate all the stories I know of these sort of miracles so I will just tell you two which I think you will like particularly. One day when she was cooking meat for some guests, a poor starving dog came and looked at her piteously as if demanding something to eat. Our holy Mother's heart was moved with pity, and she gave the poor animal some of the meat reserved for the guests, but afterwards when she came to divide it she found that its weight was the same as before—what she had given the dog was not missing—and thus all God's creatures profited by her kindness and goodness of heart.

Candida: O thank you, Sister, I do indeed like that story, and now pray tell me the other one!

St. Blath: In my other story it is a cow that plays its part. A holy bishop with a number of others came unexpectedly one day to Cill Dara just when the good Abbess had distributed all the food in the monastery to the poor, and she found herself with no other refreshment to offer them but the milk of one cow. But this did not trouble our dear Mother; she simply turned to God in faith and confidence and begged Him to help her in her necessity. Then she commanded the cow to be milked, and to the astonishment of all, it was found that it yielded as much milk as three!

Candida: I think it was probably because Brigid was so generous in her services to God that He was so generous to her even in His earthly gifts. Do you

know any more stories of animals in connection with her miracles?

St. Blath: There is the story of the dog she put to guard some meat which she wished to keep for the poor. She prayed, and, contrary to nature of his kind, he did not touch it, but faithfully guarded it till she came back to distribute it among the poor.

Candida: Perhaps it was the same poor, starving dog that she once fed, and that he did her this service out of gratitude.

St. Blath: I do not know, but I do know that the Almighty was pleased to give her some of the power that man would have wielded over the brute creation had he continued in his primitive state of innocence. The fear that some animals have of us, and the ferocity of others is all due to sin. Brigid, by her innocence and great grace found favour in God's eyes, and He rewarded her by the friendship and obedience of even wild animals and birds.

Candida: What kind of wild animals?

St. Blath: Wolves and boars for example. There was the wild boar that used to devastate the country, but after Brigid's blessing became quiet and tame, and the wolf that one day jumped up into her chariot and hid under her cloak, as she was driving to the king on a mission of mercy. There is another story too, that I like very much. It is about some wild birds, and I saw the wonder myself. One day when we were walking together by a lake we saw a number of wild ducks swimming on the water. You know

what timid, wild, little creatures they are, and at the sound of our footsteps they rose with a startled flutter to fly away. But Brigid called them, and the whole flock came obediently to her. I shall never forget the sight! Some perched on her shoulders, some on her hands which they caressed with their beaks and others flew round her, as if they loved her company. She petted them for some time, and then she told them to fly away. Again, they obeyed and flew back to the water, seeming all the happier for having made the acquaintance of our dear Mother.

Candida: She was indeed a dear Mother, and *I* too, like that miracle particularly. It is different, too, from the other stories you have told me, because in the others God Almighty worked wonders for some useful end, such as the increase of food for the poor, or for the confusion of wicked people, but when He changed the wild nature of those birds and made them obey Brigid's call, He seemed to have no other motive but to give her pleasure. Do you know any other stories like that?

St. Blath: I do not think so, but you remember when she was a child how the wild birds would flock round her singing their sweetest songs, and how the little lambs never strayed far away from her when she was minding them.

Candida: Yes, I remember, but now I am going to ask you a question that you may think strange. Did our holy Mother always appear gracious and kind in her miracles?—I mean did she ever work a miracle to punish or to reprimand?

St. Blath: She never worked a miracle to punish a wrong done to herself. Those miracles which God worked to vindicate her honour before wicked people were not done at her prayer. She did not hesitate, however, to act severely for faults against charity, or for want of mercy to her dear poor, and she was known to work miracles to punish these faults.

Candida: Can you tell me any?

St. Blath: Yes, and your request does not displease me, as I want you to have a thorough knowledge of our holy Mother's character. I will tell you first the miracle of the apple tree as it happened early in her religious life. You remember the journeying she made through Eire after the foundation of Ardagh?

Candida: O Yes.

St. Blath: Well, one day a woman arrived where Brigid was staying and begged her to accept a present of some apples which she brought. She graciously accepted the gift, but a moment later two poor lepers arrived asking charity, and having nothing else to give them she wished to divide the apples between them. This act deeply offended the woman who had given the apples, and she took them back, saying: "I brought the apples for you, not for the lepers." Our holy Mother was gravely displeased at this want of compassion, and she answered: "You do very ill in forbidding alms-giving to the poor, and you will suffer for it, for henceforth your apple trees will bear no more fruit." When the woman returned home she went to look at her orchard, and she found to her

dismay that Brigid's prophecy had already been fulfilled—the trees that she had left green and full of apples were withered and bare, and from that day they bore no more fruit.

Candida: That was indeed a severe punishment, and I expect the woman well regretted her harshness to those poor men.

St. Blath: On another occasion our holy Mother showed herself equally severe for a fault against charity. Two lepers, knowing her power with God came and begged her to cure them of their leprosy. She prayed, and making the Sign of the Cross on some water, she bade them wash one another in it. The first, after having been washed, seeing himself cured, was so delighted at his newly-found health that, for fear of losing it, he refused to wash his companion. But, in punishment for his selfishness, he found himself covered again with leprosy, and his companion, by a simple prayer offered by Brigid was immediately cured.

Candida: God save us!

St. Blath: There is another miracle which is somewhat similar. One day Brigid commanded one of her religious to lend her cloak to a poor leper, but the Sister, lacking both in faith and obedience, refused to do so. Instantly she became covered with leprosy. However, she sincerely repented of her fault, and Blessed Brigid, touched with compassion, prayed for her and worked a second miracle by restoring her completely to health.

Candida: Thank God that story has a merciful ending. But do you know Sister, I almost wish I had not asked you to tell me any stories of miracles worked to punish—they are so terrifying. Our holy Mother too, was so kind I am sure she was only happy when making others happy. And now, Sister, some more miracles please—but only of the gracious kind!

St. Blath: How do you know that the miracles you call terrifying had not a gracious effect on the souls of those to whom she wished to give a lesson? But you are young, and to compensate you for my serious stories I will now tell you of a very gracious, even an amusing miracle. It concerns a certain Leinster man, a very clever workman, industrious and honest too, and endowed with the strength of twelve men!

Candida: He must have been greatly sought after with all those good qualities!

St. Blath: No, because if he had the strength of twelve men, he had also the appetite of twelve, and this peculiarity was a great embarrassment for the poor man, for no one wished to employ him except in the case of wanting some one to execute a feat of strength. He was often thus in want of employment, to the great grief of his wife, for they were poor, and she found it difficult to supply him with the food of twelve men. Brigid heard of the plight of the poor family, and was so moved with compassion that she prayed to the God of Miracles for a remedy in their trouble. Her prayer was answered; for behold! the next time that the good man sat down to table he

found that he was quite satisfied with the quantity of food sufficient for a man with an ordinary appetite.

Candida: O thanks; that is *really* a gracious story.

St. Blath: But the best part is to come—the same good Leinster man preserved all his life the strength of twelve men though he had only the appetite of one.

Candida: How pleased his wife must have been. I expect too she was deeply touched at holy Brigid working such a miracle for the comfort of her family.

St. Blath: Distress of every kind moved her compassion. And now I will tell you how she cured a little dumb girl of her infirmity—I don't think I have yet told you of any of the miracles she wrought for children. The little girl of whom I speak was twelve years old, and dumb from her birth. Her mother brought her to the convent one day, and Brigid taking her by the hand asked her if for the love of Christ she would consecrate her virginity to Him. "But my child cannot speak," said the mother. "Nevertheless," said Brigid, "I will not let go her hand till she shall have answered me." Then, the strings of the dumb child's tongue were loosed, and she, who had never been able to speak a word said in a sweet, distinct voice that with the grace of God she would consecrate herself to Him, and from that day forth she had the perfect use of her speech.

Candida: What a beautiful story of a vocation, and how our holy Mother must have loved to have helped it!

St. Blath: There is another story of a wonder she worked to help likewise the entry of a young girl into her convent. As in many other of her miracles it was the Sign of the Cross she used to invoke God's power.

Candida: O please tell me how!

St. Blath: A chieftain's daughter having stolen away in secret from her father's house to take refuge in Brigid's monastery on the very day that had been appointed for her marriage, the father mounted his horse, and with several retainers pursued her with the intention of taking her away by force from the monastery. Brigid saw the company arriving in the distance, and making the Sign of the Cross on the ground both horses and riders remained fixed to the spot, powerless to move! The father, fortunately, recognised the prodigy as a direct manifestation of the will of God concerning his daughter's state of life, and repenting of his fault begged pardon of God and the holy Abbess, and allowed his daughter to enter the monastery.

Candida: God be praised! How wonderful He is in all His ways and works.

St. Blath: Yes, let every Spirit praise Him! And now I think there only remains for me to give you some examples of Brigid's miracles with nature. I will tell you, so, one or two stories which belong to my own county of Cill Dara.

Candida: Only one or two stories more! Surely there are many others to tell about our holy mother.

St. Blath: Many more indeed.[2] So many that it would take me hours and days to tell you all, and I cannot give the time for that. Our hour's talk has already been prolonged, but I do not wish to be too niggardly with you as we will only have one more talk together. Listen now, and I will tell you the story of the miraculous saving of a harvest one season. It was in September, and Brigid appointed a certain day for the men to come to reap the crops on the land around the monastery. They came, and as they worked they saw the sky gradually darken over the surrounding country. Then the rain fell in such torrents throughout the province that the fields were soon under water, and the swollen rivers overflowed their banks. All this time, from early morning till evening, Brigid's harvesters worked on dry ground and in beautiful sunshine, the God of the Elements having directed the rain so that none fell on the lands around the monastery.

Candida: Our holy Mother's prayer seemed like a key which opened or shut at will God's treasure house!

St. Blath: Yes, because of her confidence and faith. Once indeed, the God of Miracles was pleased to enact a prodigy at her prayer which seemed almost a literal proof of the truth of the words of the Gospel: "*If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you should say to this mountain, remove from thence hither, and it shall remove.*"[3]

[2] Baronius wrote that he read an old manuscript (in the Monastery of St. Cecilia in Rome) twenty-four chapters of which were entirely devoted to St. Brigid's miracles.

[3] Matt. xvii, 19.

Candida: O do tell me how!

St. Blath: By the miraculous moving of a great weight. It was an enormous tree which Brigid caused to be felled, and which she wished to transport whole to another place. For this object a number of the strongest men in the neighbourhood gathered together and tried to drag the tree with ropes and by various devices. Their strength, however, proved utterly insufficient, even several yoke of oxen harnessed with ropes to the tree failed to stir it. Holy Brigid then, seeing the impossibility of moving the tree by human means turned to God in prayer and asked His help, and lo! the workers were able to carry the tree without any effort to the place designed by the holy Abbess.

Candida: What occasion of glory to God and honour to Brigid all those wonders must have been![4]

St. Blath: Most certainly, for it always happened that these wonders obtained spiritual favours for those who witnessed them—the wicked would be converted and the good encouraged in the practice of virtue.

Candida: Our holy Mother's nature seemed to have had all the qualities of the sunshine—shedding brightness all around and bringing health and joy to the infirm of body and mind.

St. Blath: Quite true, and God granted healing powers even to the objects she used. We know this from the story of her miraculous girdle.

[4] The hagiologists, in the early *Lives of St. Brigid,* invariably added after the relation of one of her miracles some such expression as :—*"The people praised God and blessed His servant": "They thanked God and praised holy Brigid."* . . .

Candida: What story?

St. Blath: One day when travelling a poor woman accosted Brigid and begged an alms. She had nothing to give her, but divinely inspired she handed her the girdle she was wearing saying: "I know of your poverty, and how also there are many ills and miseries in your district. Take this girdle, for, sprinkled with holy water, God, in the name of His Son, will cure all sufferers by it, and it will bring food and clothing to those in real want."

Candida: What joy it must have brought to that region.

St. Blath: Yes, and the first miracle that God gave the girdle power to work was a most touching one. There was a certain good couple whose only child fell grievously ill, and as the little one was tenderly loved by his parents they were in the greatest anguish at the thought of losing him. The poor woman, the happy possessor of the girdle, heard of their distress and hastened to the place where the child lay in his agony, and she laid the girdle on him. He was instantly cured at its touch, while his parents wept with joy, and blessed God and Brigid for the mercy shown them. But no more stories for to-day. Duty before everything, and as the clouds have lifted, and the sun has come out, the Sisters will be starting to work again. Take your cloak then, like a good child, and run off to join them.

Candida: Very well. I must do as you tell me, otherwise you will say that our talks about our holy

Mother have done me no good, and you will not let me come again!

St. Blath: A worthy reason surely . . . . !

Candida: I mean . . . .

St. Blath: O I know what you mean, my good little Sister, and to show you that I think our talks are doing you good, I invite you to come again to-morrow. Meanwhile the blessing of Brigid on you, and her mantle around you wherever you go, or wherever you stay.

CONFERENCE VI.

Holy Brigid's Relations with St. Patrick. Her Blessed End.

Arise, make haste, my love, my dove, my beautiful one and come
For Winter is now past, the rain is over and gone.
The flowers have appeared in our land.
Cant. of Canticles, II—10, 11, 12.

Candida: God be with you, Sister!

St. Blath: And God and Mary with you, my heart. But pray, how did you find me out here? I thought the hillock hid me from view.

Candida: But I was on the top gathering herbs! I came up by the other side. I waited for a few minutes thinking to see you move, and then when I saw that you were doing nothing I thought I would come to join you.

St. Blath: You thought I was doing nothing! The little Blath of our holy Mother to sit down and do nothing! God grant that I may never dishonour my training like that!

Candida: O I know you are never idle a moment. I meant to say that I could not *see* what you were doing, and *still* I cannot see, so you will tell me, will you not, good old Sister Blath.

St. Blath: If you really *must* know—I was making my evening meditation.

"The flowers have appeared in our land."
—Cant. of Cant. II. 12

Candida: O above all things I would like to know something about your meditations. What was this evening's one about? Do tell me.

St. Blath: Tell you what my meditation was about! What next will you ask me, I wonder.

Candida: I will ask you to talk to me about holy Brigid. Or rather, I will ask you to talk about her, and your meditation at the same time, for I believe she comes into all your holy thoughts.

St. Blath: You are right child! Thoughts of Brigid always raise my heart to God, and when I think of God how can I help remembering her, as it was she who first taught me to know Him? I will tell you another thing—the marvels of the different seasons also make me think of God and of her, for nature symbolises so much in the supernatural life.

Candida: And this beautiful spring evening—what did it make you think of?

St. Blath: It made me think of words I heard Bishop Conlaeth read from the Holy Scriptures one day, and which, he said, could be applied to grace conquering evil in our hearts. Then I thought how Eire could say those same words to-day; and then I fell to thanking God and Brigid, and our holy father Patrick for having made all those things possible.

Candida: And those words of Holy Scripture? You have not yet told me what they were.

St. Blath: . . . . " Winter is now past,[1] the rain is

[1] Cant. of Cant. II, 11, 12.

over and gone. The flowers have appeared in our land."

Candida: I think I know what you meant when you said that our country could say those words: it is because the cold of her unbelief is past, the darkness is gone and the beautiful things that follow Christian faith are seen everywhere in our land. It is no wonder that your thoughts made you praise and bless God and Brigid for all they have done for us.

St. Blath: And then I prayed that we might never take to ourselves the glory of their work, and that if an enemy ever dared to try to uproot the beautiful things that now belong to Eire, or to cast bad seed into her furrows, that he himself might be uprooted and cast headlong from the land!

Candida: O Sister, I never heard you talk like that before!

St. Blath: You asked me for my thoughts this evening, and I tell them to you simply. But you look frightened, child, and for your comforting I must tell you that even while I thought of what a wicked enemy might try to do, I seemed to hear the echo of Victor's voice assuring Patrick "*their faith shall never fail.*"

Candida: Thank God for that, and now Sister, tell me what makes you think an enemy may try to uproot Patrick's and Brigid's sowing?

St. Blath: A vision that our holy mother once had. It was when she was journeying in the north. Patrick was there at the same time preaching, and his zeal and

the eagerness of his newly-made Christians to hear the Word of God was so great that neither he nor they felt any weariness, though he preached on one occasion for three days and three nights without intermission.

Candida: God be praised, that was indeed a long sermon; but what about our holy Mother?

St. Blath: She was present, but, to the surprise of all, she fell asleep!

Candida: I do not think it was very surprising—she must have been exhausted, and she had come on a long journey.

St. Blath: It was no common sleep she slept as you will see. Patrick having noticed her sleep reproved her gently: "How comes it, daughter," said he, "that you sleep while the Word of God is being spoken?" "O Father, pardon me," she answered, "for during this time I have had a vision." "What saw you," said Patrick and he commanded her to tell the vision. Brigid then related how she had seen four ploughs ploughing the whole of Eire, while sowers in white garments went scattering seed. The seed sprang up quickly and ripened immediately while rivulets of fresh milk filled the furrows. "But afterwards," said Brigid, "I saw other ploughs with black ploughers and they destroyed with their ploughshares the growing corn, and they sowed tares in the furrows." Patrick interpreted the vision saying that he and his disciples were the ploughers in white garments, who with the shares of the four Gospels

were cultivating human hearts and sowing God's Word, and that the furrows of milk represented the Christian faith which followed their labours. The ploughers in black who tried to uproot the good corn and scatter bad seed were, said he, wicked men who would follow and who would try to destroy God's work and theirs in Eire.[2]

Candida: Ah, now I understand your prayer, and with all my heart I join in it: "May those wicked men be uprooted themselves, and cast headlong from the land." I wonder if the vision troubled Patrick or our holy Mother?

St. Blath: They must have been grieved at the thought of men's wickedness, but it is certain that their faith in God and our people was not shaken. Patrick had the angel's words to assure him, and Brigid, as I believe, some revelation from the Holy Spirit, that her work would never fail.

Candida: What makes you think that, Sister?

St. Blath: The words she was heard to utter in prayer while yet a little child, and which surely had a prophetic meaning. Do you not know the story?

Candida: No, do tell it to me, please.

St. Blath: I will and welcome, for it is a most comforting and beautiful one. As she was praying intently one day, her little arms stretched out and her

[2] In *The Tripartite Life of St. Patrick* it is related that St. Brigid had a vision of white oxen in white cornfields, then darker oxen, and lastly black with swine and dogs worrying sheep. All these things St. Patrick explained were symbols of the history of the Irish Church.

eyes raised to heaven, a stranger who was passing struck by the sight approached her and saluted her: "This place shall be mine," murmured the child, still apparently in prayer. The saying made the stranger wonder, and not being a Christian he went to consult a Druid as to what it might mean. Now, God, as you know, sometimes gives to unbelievers to speak the truth with regard to hidden things, and the Druid answered: "The child is a prophetess and she spoke truly, for this place shall be hers for ever." We can surely interpret the words "this place" as all Eire, for later on when Brigid grew up and founded her convents in the four quarters of the land, and counted among her sisterhood the daughters of kings and chiefs as well as the humble and the poor, did not all Eire belong to her? All Eire is the place that shall belong to her for ever.

Candida: Thank you, Sister, that is indeed a comforting and beautiful story, and if I ever feel anxious I will think of it. So added to all her other gifts and graces our holy Mother had also the spirit of prophecy?

St. Blath: O yes, and Patrick did not hesitate to say that she was his equal in this great gift of the Holy Spirit, and once he asked her to explain a miraculous sign that appeared one day when he was preaching in the north.

Candida: What was this sign?

St. Blath: A great brightness, a luminous cloud, as it were, that was seen extending from heaven to earth. It rested for a while near where the holy Bishop

stood, and then moved slowly away to Dun Lethglaisse. The people wondered at the strange sight, and asked an explanation from Patrick, but he turned to our holy Mother and said before all: "You and I are equals, explain this wonder to the people." Then in obedience Brigid spoke: "The light," said she, "represents the spirit of the Bishop Patrick going to visit the place where his body will rest after death, whereas the place where it rested first for a short time will be where his body will remain unburied for some days," and so all fell out as she predicted.

Candida: What veneration and love our holy Mother must have had for Patrick.[3]

St. Blath: Yes, they were as father and daughter to one another, and when she knew that death was nigh her one wish was to receive his parting benediction.

Candida: He died at Saul, did he not?

St. Blath: Yes, and as Brigid was at her monastery in Cill Dara at the time of his last illness she set out for Saul with four of her daughters, and she took with her the winding sheet she had long since woven, with which to enshroud his holy body.

Candida: She wove his shroud a long time before! I wonder she did that—it must have made her sad.

[3] In the ancient *Lives of St. Brigid* there are several allusions to St. Patrick's meeting with the Saint. But, as Dr. Healy remarks in his *Insula Sanctorum et Doctorum,* it is strange that in the *Lives of St. Patrick* the only mention made of St. Brigid is that in connection with her vision of the oxen in the cornfields, which is said to have taken place near Clogher.

St. Blath: She thought more of the joy death would bring *him*, than of her own sorrow. How often you interrupt me, child, with your strange fancies. Let us return to Brigid. She grew faint with exhaustion on the road, and the Sisters feared she would have to abandon her journey. But the distress of the holy company was revealed to Patrick on his deathbed, and he sent his horses and chariot for them. They arrived in time and Brigid presented her offering. Then she reverently kissed the holy man's hands and feet, and received his blessing. With that blessing she was wonderfully comforted, and she returned home strengthened to continue the work of fostering the blessed seed of faith which he had sown with such loving care.

Candida: How the people must have mourned blessed Patrick's passing!

St. Blath: The like mourning for a man was never seen before in Eire, just as no woman was ever mourned as Brigid was when her time came for leaving us.

Candida: I do not like to hear you talking of our holy Mother's death. It seems as if our talks were soon to end, also while you were talking of her work and telling me stories of her, she seemed so near—I could almost see her and hear her voice. After you have told me of her passing I fear she may seem further away from me.

St. Blath: That should not be, as her spirit is as near to us as when she walked among us, and her work is revealed by the flowers that cover the land.

But you are right in thinking that my story is nearly ended. When Brigid had accomplished all the things that I have told you she was spent with age and fatigue. Then the time came when God revealed to her that she had but four years more to live.

Candida: Did she tell the sisterhood?

St. Blath: She told Darlua, her specially loved daughter whom she designed to succeed her. Then calmly and with great wisdom she arranged all the affairs of her monastery of Cill Dara, and gave her last instructions to the thirty other convents that owed her obedience.

Candida: And what were those last instructions?

St. Blath: Some concerned the material government of her houses, but, for the most part, they were words of spiritual direction to her religious. You must know at least what the *spirit* of those instructions was after hearing the story of her life.

Candida: I think I do, Sister. Was it not zeal for God's honour and mercy and love for His creatures?

St. Blath: Yes, and such was her confidence in God that she did not feel the least solicitude as to the fidelity of her daughter in keeping that spirit. Her one care was the strengthening of her soul for the journey from this life, and according as she had prophesied, Blessed Ninnidh of the Clean Hand—the little scholar of long ago whom she had met running on the Currach—administered the Holy Viaticum to her in her own dear city of Cill Dara.

Candida: And then?

St. Blath: And then, after a last blessing to her daughters, and a short spell of waiting came the call: *Arise, make haste . . . . my beautiful one, and come, for the Winter is now past*, and holy Brigid went in joy and met, in all His eternal Beauty, Him whom she had served in Eire in the guise of the poor, the miserable, and the afflicted.[4]

Candida: O Sister, what a meeting! but even the thought of all that joy and splendour cannot prevent me grieving for those she left on earth. They must have been so lonely, so desolate.

St. Blath: They were truly. Ah! I shall never forget the scenes at Cill Dara the days following our dear Mother's death—how the roads were black with people coming to reverence her holy body; how the cries and lamentations of the poor filled the air; how the clerics and the Sons of Reading wept as they psalmodied around her bier!

Candida: Her daughters above all—how *they* must have sorrowed. But, thank God, she died with them, and in her own loved monastery of Cill Dara.

St. Blath: Yes, and there she rests in company with her good Bishop Conlaeth, beside the altar, and there she continues her ministry of love and mercy, for prayers offered by her tomb have a most wonderful efficacy for the curing of ills of soul and body and the alleviating of suffering.

Candida: O how beautiful and wonderful it all was—the life and death of our holy Mother.

[4] 523—25.

St. Blath: Yes, and how simple too, for she never concerned herself with but one thing. You surely know what *that* was.

Candida: The love of God and His creatures?

St. Blath: Yes, what need to say more! Gather up your bundle of herbs, child, and let us return to the monastery.

Candida: Just as you like, Sister. God bless you for your story; it has taught me so many things, but, above all, it has shown me the power of Love.

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